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Opinion

CIA's failures haunt agency

The CIA, a convenient whipping boy, has come in for a barrage of criticism after the recent publication of a story that tenuously links the agency to a car bombing in Beirut that killed more than 80 people.

Whether such criticism is deserved or not remains to be seen, for the full story is not clear.

The bombing on March 8 was reportedly an attempt on the life of a militant Shiite leader — Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah — who is thought to be behind terrorist attacks on U.S. installations in the Middle East. The car bombing, reported *The Washington Post*, was carried out by people hired by a Lebanese counterterrorism unit that had (emphasis added) been working with the CIA. An unnamed administration spokesman said in explanation that "this was not our operation and it was nothing we planned or knew about."

That may well be the simple truth, but unfortunately when it involves the CIA the "simple truth" is rarely simple, or even true.

There has been too much news from the agency's "Department of Dirty Tricks" for one to automatically believe the CIA's protestations of innocence. There are too many skeletons packed in its closet, like, for instance, the CIA-sponsored coup in Guatemala in the early 1950s, the U-2 spyplane

misadventure, the Bay of Pigs, assorted clumsy assassination attempts against Castro, the alleged masterminding of the destabilization of the Allende regime in Chile, the mining of Nicaraguan harbors and so on.

But in the very nature of its work, the public hears only of the agency's failures and not of its successes.

The agency has undoubtedly had many successes that only a handful of the top people in government know about. But its failures and abortive operations make it an easy target for the denunciations of the extreme left, for whom it is an article of faith that CIA is evil incarnate.

The agency is not an evil child, part of the Soviet KGB, or a "secret government" or a *Stadt in Stadt*. Neither is it a brilliant nest of daring spies, in the James Bond manner. It performs a rather tedious and uninteresting but indispensable function. That day-to-day function is to provide the United States government with a realistic assessment of the threats it faces and how to counter those threats.

It is unfortunate that sometimes its primary mission of providing the best intelligence capability in the world is hampered by dirty-trick blunders, failed operations that look like they were designed by a fumbling Inspector Clouseau instead of a James Bond.